THE P. AND O. STRIKE

A TRUE STORY

By a Former Secret Service Operative

Government Probe Into Affairs in Western State Where Mail Threatened to Be Delayed Because of Walkout Brings a Friend—Strange Condition of Affairs Related by Man Directly Implicated in Them.

Resurrection of an Old Chum of College Days in the Far West—Its Consequences—Thrilling Episodes of the Labor Trouble Reunited Two Men—Major's Death and Its Tragic Revelation, Which Captain Dickson Saw in a Picture and Wisp of Hair.

IT IS human nature for every man to think that his troubles are greater than those of any other son, but no one really ever knows the sorrows gnawing at another person's heart, even though the other be one's dearest friend. This fact was impressed upon me in a manner that I shall never forget while I was working on a simple proposition that grew out of a railway strike."

Capt. Dickson, a former official of the United States secret service, now retired, was in a musing frame of mind, when I called on him the other evening and he gave expression to the foregoing words. Something that happened during the day, had brought to his mind one of the vivid experiences of his days of active service, and I had no trouble in getting him to relate the circumstances as I put them down in his own words.

The P. & O. was a little railroad that ran between two small towns in a certain western state, and I happened to become mixed up with this labor difficulty because of the fact that the road carried the mails. My department was brought into play to prevent any interference with the government mail service by the strikers.

The country at large was not much affected by the tying up of this insignificant part of the great network of railroads. Yet the government, with the thoroughness it displays in everything connected with it, took the liveliest interest in the case. I was assigned to it with instructions to see that the mail train made its regular daily trip without being molested.

I was much surprised to find an old college-mate of mine officiating as general manager of the road. I remembered him as a studious, gawky, red-headed youngster, who was taking a course in civil engineering. I had some work with him in the surveying class, which was a part of the course of mining engineering to which I was devoting my attention. He was too self-centered and too studious to be popular with the boys of his class, and because I appreciated his loneliness and showed him some slight courtesies, he formed a deep attachment for me. We promised to write when we left college, but as those promises generally go, neither of us thought of it or, if we did, ever acted upon it. We quite lost track of each other until I walked into his office one afternoon to confer with him about the strike.

He was not quite as red-headed and gawky as in his college days, but he had changed so little that I readily recognized him. He knew me instantly and greeted me with a warmth and a genuine pleasure that was most agreeable. He was snowed under with work, but he brushed aside the mass of papers that littered his desk and made me sit down and tell him something of my experiences since I had left college before he would take up business matters with me. He told me of the struggle he had had in climbing from obscurity to his present responsible position, which was not in any sense an unimportant one. His road was a feeder or tap-line for one of the big trans-continental systems, and his post put him in direct line for promotion into the service of the latter.

He was as frank and engaging and devoted to his work as when he had been an awkward, bashful college boy, looked down upon, shunned and despised by his classmates because of his poor circumstances and his lack of time to be what they considered a good fellow. He had fought his way upward against the greatest difficulties, and I marveled at his ability to cope with the adverse conditions that I knew had confronted him in his battle. Since then I have come to know that it is only by fighting that a man can develop the best that is in him and that the more obstacles he encounters and overcomes the better man he makes in the end.

After talking over old times for a while we got down to business, and I soon gathered a thorough knowledge of the situation. The trainmen had conceived that they were being unjustly treated and had made certain complaints, coupled with certain demands. Majors, my friend, had duly investigated their complaints and considered their demands and had found that there was virtue in neither, but that both were inspired by labor agitators who saw a chance to advance their own selfish interests by bringing about a difficulty between the road and its employes. The demands had been refused and the men had gone out on strike.

Majors had come up from the ranks himself and had every sympathy for the men until he had convinced himself that they were in the wrong. Once convinced on this point, he had bowed his neck and refused to treat with them further unless they returned to work unconditionally. The men knew his determined character and they realized that he meant just what he had said. I believe they would have discontinued the strike, so popular was Majors with the men and so well was his honesty known, if it had not been for the activity of a walking delegate of the trainmen's union.

Another obstacle to a settlement of the trouble was the president of the road. He was a wealthy mine owner, and one of the best paying properties was situated at the terminus of the road. It was a silver mine, and that metal was quoted at a good figure just then. Consequently, he chafed at the forced inactivity of his mine and favored granting the concessions asked by the men. But Majors was as firm as a rock, his position once taken, and he fought the president himself with the same dogged determination he had displayed towards the men.

Majors was the key to the situation, the stumbling-block to both interests, and ugly threats were made against him by the strikers. He had succeeded in operating the line after a fashion, although schedules were disarranged and the service was generally demoralized. It was only his forceful personality that had accomplished even this, and as soon as I made even a cursory examination of conditions I saw that my friend held a dangerous as well as a difficult position.

The day after my arrival I was present when he received a delegation of the strikers, and I was more than ever impressed with his indomitable will by this interview. There were four of the strikers, headed by a man named Halliday, the walking delegate to whom I have referred. He was pompous, overbearing, pudgy, unscrupulous, and a man of most malignant countenance. He was the speaker for the strikers, and I thought that I detected something more dangerous than ardor for his cause in the insolent manner he displayed during the interview.

Majors heard the impassioned address of the delegate without interrupting him and, when he had finished, turned to the others, whom he called by name, and whom he addressed as follows:

"Boys, I have looked into your case as carefully as if it were my own. You are in the wrong; there is no virtue in your contentions and I cannot consider them further. You have been receiving better wages and better and fairer treatment than the employes of any other road in this state. You haven't a legitimate cause of complaint and you are wasting your own time and mine as well to seek a further conference with me until you come to your senses and are willing to return to work on the old terms. Any of you who wish to return to the service may do so without prejudice. You are being deluded by a selfish agitator who is profiting by the misfortunes which his counsel has brought upon you. If you prefer to follow him rather than me, I have nothing farther to say to you. I am going to run the P. & O. in spite of you or anything that you do. If you resort to violence I will have the guilty run down and punished if it takes a thousand years. I have nothing farther to say to you."

Halliday, the agitator, glared dangerously at Majors during the interview, and as he sulkily slunk out of the room I overheard him breathing threats against my friend to one of his companions.

The climax of the strike came the following day when one of the trains was derailed and the fireman and engineer, who were strike-breakers, were killed. Majors went in person to the scene of the wreck to investigate. It didn't take a prolonged examination to determine that the wreck was the result of direct and premeditated design. This aroused every drop of fighting blood in my friend, and he set about tracking down the guilty persons with the utmost vigor. He employed the best detective talent obtainable, and it was not many days before two of the strikers, tools of Halliday, had been arrested and there was every chance that both of them would hang for the job. Suspicion pointed strongly towards Halliday as the instigator of the plot, but we were satisfied that he had not had any direct part in carrying it out. He was too wise for that, but Majors gathered evidence against him that promised to put him in the same boat with his confederates.

I SPRANG UPON HIM FROM BEHIND.

He told me about this one afternoon when I visited him at his office. One of the office boys hung about as we talked, in a way that I did not like, and I cautioned Majors lest he be overheard and Halliday warned, but he scoffed at my fears and said he trusted the boy. Nevertheless, I didn't like the gleam that came into the boy's eyes when he heard what Majors had to say about Halliday. Things looked threatening for the delegate. I knew that he was a dangerous character and I feared that he might try to escape from the net that Majors was weaving about him by trying to silence Majors in the only way that was possible.

That night Majors had promised to call on me at my hotel to sample a bottle of 30-year-old liquor that a friend in the revenue service had sent me from Kentucky. I had invited Majors more to get him away from his work than with any idea that he would care especially for the liquor, as I knew that he was temperate in all his tastes and habits. I knew that he needed the rest, that he was overtaxing himself with the war he was waging with the strikers, and I had not liked the haunted, worried expression that he had assumed lately. It was Saturday night and, as the road did not operate a Sunday train, Majors could afford to take the night off and enjoy the rest he needed so badly. I think he appreciated this, for he accepted my invitation with alacrity.

He came in late, and I saw at once that something was preying upon his mind. I was far from guessing the real nature of his trouble for I attributed it to the strike. We made a sorry endeavor to renew our old college gayety, but it wouldn't work. Majors was abstracted and let me do most of the talking. I told him what I knew of the old boys, and recalled many amusing incidents of our school life, but I could not rouse him from the fit of despondence into which he was sunk. And through it all, Majors sat with a far-away look on his face, and I saw that he was not following my rambling talk, for once or twice when I paused for him to answer some question, he was so deeply involved in his own gloomy thoughts that he didn't know I had stopped speaking.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that he enjoyed the evening, poor fellow, for towards the end of it he rallied a bit, and we had a lively half hour of it before he had to take his departure. I wanted to walk with him to his rooms, which were over his office, but he would not permit me to accompany him farther than the nearest corner to my own lodgings. When we came to shake hands, he held on to mine like a drowning man to a plank and seemed half inclined to confide something to me. He opened his mouth several times as if he were going to speak, but each time he seemed to think better of it and merely wished me a hearty "good night."

As we stood talking, I noticed Halliday passing down the opposite side of the street and he scowled across at us malignantly. I asked Majors if he were armed, and hinted to him the suspicions that I had formed concerning Halliday; for I was certain that the agitator knew that if Majors was out of the way the strikers would carry their point and he and his confederates who had wrecked the train would probably escape punishment.

Majors laughed my fears away and said he had never carried a weapon in his life and that he had never seen the time when he needed one. As I walked back to my hotel, I saw Halliday skulking along in the shadows on the far side of the street. I didn't like the looks of it and decided to follow him and if he intended harm to my friend to prevent him from accomplishing it.

He dodged into a side street a short distance farther on and I plunged in after him, as I fancied that he intended intercepting Majors on the way to his rooms. Nor was I wrong. Halliday cut through alleys and unfrequented streets until he came out upon the main thoroughfare where the railroad offices were located and less than a block distant from them. He took up a position in the mouth of a dark alley, behind a telegraph pole and I was now convinced that he meant harm to my friend.

The streets were deserted. It was about midnight and people in small towns retire early. Before long I could hear footsteps approaching and I readily recognized the athletic tread of Majors. I slipped up behind Halliday with great caution, so that I might pinion his arms if he attempted to fire the big revolver that I now detected in his hand. Majors had almost reached the mouth of the alley when I saw Halliday's hand being slowly raised. I knew it would be dangerous to wait longer so I sprang upon him from behind and clasped him in a hug that made his ribs pop like a pack of firecrackers.

He was taken so completely by surprise that he was at my mercy, and although he struggled like a demon, I disarmed him and handcuffed him in a very short space of time. Just as I accomplished this, Majors came rushing up. The mouth of the alley was in complete darkness but out on the street there was a faint light from the arc light at the corner. I called to Majors so that he might know of my presence. At this, he stopped stock still and peered into the gloom of the alleyway.

"Great Heavens, Dickson," he ejaculated, "what are you doing in there?"

I blurted out a few words of explanation, and Majors was in the the act of stepping into the darkness to join me when there was a loud report and I saw him stagger and pitch forward on his face. He fell half in the light and half in the gloom of the alley's mouth.

I ran forward and gathered him into my arms, lifting his face out into the light of the street. I saw that he was fatally wounded, the clammy sweat of death being upon his brow. Halliday had not tried to escape but had run forward with me, and as I looked up at his from the face of my prostrate friend I saw that he was almost as white as a corpse. A moment before he had been intent upon taking the life of my friend, but now the enormity of his contemplated act was full upon him and he trembled like a leaf in a gale.

"My God," he moaned, "I might have been his murderer! Thank God I am not!"

The seal of death was upon the blanched face of my friend, his breath came in long, rasping gasps, and his eyes were rapidly setting in that glassy stare which comes but once in the life of a human being. He looked up at me, an expression of contentment upon his marbled features, and made an effort to speak.

I bent my ear close to his lips.

"Old man," he breathed, so low that I could scarcely hear him, "you don't know what your friendship has been to me these last few days. I have never had any other whom I considered my friend. I knew this was coming. There was no way to escape it and I am glad your hands will be the ones to close my eyes."

He paused a moment for breath. The candle of his life was burning low and I knew that the tiny flame could not last for long. I saw that he was making a desperate effort to live until he could tell me something, for a look of his old time determination came into his face and he half-lifted himself upon his elbows. I knew enough of his character to believe that he would conquer even Death until his iron will had accomplished his purpose.

I gathered him into a closer embrace against my throbbing heart.

"Don't try to find my slayer," he resumed after a time. "It's no use. The strikers didn't do it. They are innocent. The key on my watch chain—" A pause while he panted for breath and then he continued, brokenly, "Secret drawer—desk—explains all. Good-bye."

I searched his desk for the secret drawer, supposing it was the big roller-top one at his office to which his laborious duties held him so constant a slave. But it contained no secret drawer, so I turned my attention to his room. It was my first visit to his apartments and I was amazed at the bareness of them. The back room was fitted up as a sleeping apartment. It was not carpeted and it contained only a bed, dresser and washstand of the cheapest kind. Everything about it suggested direst poverty. It was as barren as a priest's cell.

I could not account for this, as I knew that Majors made an excellent salary and his appearance had always been prosperous. Sorely troubled by this discovery, I turned my attention to the front room. It was almost as bleak as his sleeping quarters, except for an easy chair, several cases of books, and a richly carved mahogany desk which would have set a collector's heart beating at a dangerous rate. I saw at a glance that this was the desk that Majors had referred to. One of his keys opened it and I looked about for the secret drawer. It didn't take long to locate it but I experienced some difficulty in opening it. Within, I found a tin bond-box which the tiny key from his watch chain unlocked. It contained two packets, one addressed to me.

Opening the latter packet I found a letter with my name upon it and I set about reading it at once.

Dear Friend: I am within the shadow of death as I write. A danger which has hovered over my unfortunate head since the hour of my birth is closing in upon me. There is no escaping it. If it were my secret alone, I would confide in you, but it is not mine and I must let it die with me. I am writing this so that suspicion will not attach to the strikers should I be found dead, for they will have nothing to do with my assassination. I do not know when or how it will come, but I do know that the end is not far off and I thank God for it. I have no relatives and none will come to claim my body or the little property that I leave. I want you to take my desk, books, and easy chair, the only pleasures that I have had in life, for it is right that they should go to you who have been my only friend.

Since my earliest recollection I have nursed my secret sorrow and endeavored to wait with patience for the blow that shall fall upon me when it is least expected. You came into my life at one of its darkest periods and you have come into it again at a time when I needed a friend more than even in my college days, and yet I could not then nor can I now confide to you the trouble that is gnawing at my vitals and keeping my soul tortured as no poor spirit was ever punished in the mystic hell of the blindest bigot.

Do not search for my slayer. It will profit you nothing. Your search will be in vain. My only apprehension is that some of the strikers may be suspected of my murder. I have one more favor to ask of you. I abjure you, by the friendship for me and your hope of happiness beyond the grave, to burn every vestige of paper within the desk where you will find this letter, especially being careful to destroy the packet in the secret drawer. If you care to examine these papers you are at liberty to do so, but I would prefer, for your own sake, that you avoid this.

Good-by, my friend.

One of the pictures was of a bright-eyed, laughing cherub of five or six years. The other, was the girl, blossomed into the radiant beauty of a perfect womanhood. I have never seen a prettier face nor a more kindly and loving one. I know that my friend had loved her and that there was nothing strange about this, but whether she was sister, mother or sweetheart only the cold heart of my friend knew and his secret was safe forevermore.

Calculating Childhood.

It is a curious sign of the times that children nowadays show a remarkable interest in money. They want to know the cost of objects, they love to play with coins, and money seems to be the present they prefer.—Zeitung, Vienna.